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AN HISTORICAL MUSEUM

CARL R. FISH

One of the easiest and most amusing additions a community can make to its attractions is an historical museum. The first step is to catch your curator. The prime duty of the first curator is collection. Little discrimination is needed, and, in the beginning little special knowledge, but one should be interested to learn many things, should be ordinarily honest, have hustle and ingenuity, and ooze with tact. Almost every community has some man, or more probably some woman, with these qualities, who would find in such work an interest for spare hours and who could before many years command the interest and co-operation of the whole neighborhood.

The next thing needed is a place. This will probably be wherever one can find room; but it is just as well to consider where an historical museum belongs. All Wisconsin towns have schoolhouses; most have libraries. Even small cities in Wisconsin are beginning to develop zoos, Madison for instance, having a very beautiful and interesting one. Many normal and high schools are building up commercial museums, and Mr. Peckham created in Milwaukee a valuable museum of natural history. Here and there are, also, the beginnings of an art museum. All these are part of the educational equipment and should work together in harmony. Any combination of them that works is satisfactory, but some are preferable to others. The commercial museum is usually in the high school, and there are perfectly respectable associations for an historical museum, but one cannot get over the fact that a school building is associated with the education of the young and that adults are often scared away. The most appropriate combination is with the library and art museum, of which a most charming and effective illustration is offered at Green Bay, than which I

have not seen anything more attractive, for its size, in Europe or America.

When a place for storage and exhibition has been secured, the next step will be the accumulation of material. Now the curator will need all her personal knowledge of families, and their histories, and their attics; all her zest in arousing people's interest in their past and their pride in having others know it; all her art in giving publicity and interest to the project. The schools, the press, and the Boy Scouts should be freely used; the curator must be prepared to answer calls to investigate treasures that are useless or that will really never be offered. Nothing must be rejected; note must be taken of everything whether it is offered or not—for who can tell what circumstance may at any moment cause the dispersal of a family's garnered treasures—and many of the best things must be accepted "on deposit," though one should try for a free gift. The two essentials are to get all one can, and to have tagged or to tag every object with the donor's story, which is often inaccurate, but may serve as a point of departure in "placing" the article.

And now when the first harvest is gathered in, the curator will sit down with it and think it over. At first it will seem to resemble a church rummage sale collection, and the first thought will be to give up the whole plan or to eliminate most of the accumulated treasures. Only, however, when a museum is very old and well established can it afford to eliminate, and then only sparingly. People must be made to feel confidence and appreciation; if their contributions are too impossible they may be left for a long time harmlessly in the purgatory of "not yet arranged." It is equally important that no fledgling curator can know what should be eliminated. Value often depends on combination; the least considered trifle may prove to be the chief stone of the corner. Arrangement may at first seem quite hopeless; at this point it would be well to consult the ever helpful Mr.

Brown of the State Historical Society's museum. A museum can never, however, be arranged on a classified system as can a library. The material must be allowed to dictate its own arrangement and will reveal some proper system if one gives it earnest thought.

Usually the first natural grouping will illustrate the pioneer life of the community. Tools, china, glassware, used by the first settlers; clothes they brought to the West with them, and quite different clothes they made after they reached the West; harness and old hymn books, fire irons, old guns, knives, spectacles and wigs, pictures, family portraits and their successors, the daguerreotypes, skillets, dolls, and medicine bottles, hair wreaths, baby linen, war medals, and old documents. Nearly any Wisconsin community still possesses in its homes enough reminders of the first days to make those days live again in the minds of the younger generation, if all be gathered together and displayed with cleverness.

But such a first reaping is almost sure to bring together much more. Our citizens came from many places, and few came quite empty handed. Smaller, stronger, and less perishable relics will drift in, which will serve as a basis for a case devoted to England, new and old, Pennsylvania and the states to the south, Germany or Belgium or Holland. Recent immigrants should not be forgotten. Wisconsin is as good a place as any in the world in which to pick up Russian brass. Bohemians and Greeks are still in touch with their old homes and patriotic enough to send back for characteristic things, cheap enough there, but adding immensely to the scope and interest of the museum.

The first collection will always be the heart of the museum, for its interest will be twofold. First will be the local association, and second will be the fascination which always attaches to hard work, for most of the articles will antedate the era of manufacturing. The foundation of the collection

will, also, be well established, for always the pioneer life and the earlier history of the various strains of population that made the community will be the central interests.

One further branch should, and may, easily be started, though it may be advisable to defer it a little and give it the advantage of a separate campaign. This is the life preceding settlement, that of the Indian and the trapper. Almost any portion of Wisconsin affords today such material, but it is not unlimited, and if not speedily gathered in, will soon disappear.

In building up the museum after it is once started, the curator should use the interest it creates to secure the assistance of others, and should drain to the limit the sources already mentioned to fill out the groups already started. Other lines, however, will continually open up, some of which are less dependent on outside good will, and more on personal initiative. For instance, photographs should be taken of storied spots and of houses interesting in themselves or because of their associations. The museum must aim to make it possible to visualize the locality at different periods. Not only amateur, but even professional photographers will often freely give their services if they are properly asked and know that what they give will be arranged in attractive form.

One connects the idea of a museum with old things, but a live curator must prepare for the future, when the things of today will be old. It may be impossible to make the museum properly illustrate the life which preceded the starting of the collection; there can be no excuse for not having it ready to reveal the life of today, though much contemporary material may seem to have no interest and had best be packed away for future revival. The curator should let no celebration pass, no important political campaign, no innovation in the way of living, without storing up illustrative relics. For instance, I always find people in-

terested in ancient clothing. It has long been a hobby with me that a most enthralling collection could be made by asking men and women of the community to donate partly worn clothes, having them cleaned and packed away. What a sensation could be created by keeping them through the period that they are "out-of-fashion," until they are "old-fashioned!" I believe that almost any town carrying out this plan systematically for a while could, without expense, suddenly produce a collection of which I do not know the equal.

All that has been mentioned so far can be done with very little money—merely what is required for simple cases and for the repair and preservation of some of the exhibits. The opportunity for spending money, however, is, as in the case of most things, enormous, and any healthy museum, once started, will find and spend. On what to spend it first is the question. Of course an historical museum should aim not solely to cultivate the self-consciousness of the community, but also its sympathies and imagination, by presenting something of the world outside. The world, however, is a large place. Probably one should mostly trust to accident, chance gifts from travelers, missionaries, and others possessing local pride and foreign association. Every museum should, however, have some one line that it actively pursues.

Sometimes a start will come by chance. The Nunnemacher collection of arms and armor in Milwaukee is an example. Some years ago a complete set of the Piranesi etchings of Rome was discovered at Superior. About this collection there might have been built up a section on Rome which would have enabled the children there to grow up with a lively sense of the greatest center of the world's history. If such nucleus is lacking, some local circumstance may give a clue. One of the most interesting small museums I ever saw was in Northampton in England. This town has for centuries been a center of boot and shoe manufacture. The

museum has collected illustrations of footwear from all ages and climes. It is not only interesting, but useful in furnishing ideas to the industrial workers of the town. How valuable would such a collection on the history of paper be at Neenah, Menasha, or Appleton, or one on fly fishing at Stevens Point, or river transportation at La Crosse, or dams and locks at Portage, or the history of lumbering at Eau Claire, Chippewa Falls, Stevens Point, or La Crosse.

And now having spoken of the easily practicable, we shall consider for a moment the ideal—a practicable ideal which has been realized in many places. The ideal place for an historical museum is in an historic building. I remember the hours of joy I passed as a boy among the quaint objects collected at Newport, Rhode Island, in an historic church building. Nearly every town possesses some building of interest because of its structure or its associations; in time such buildings nearly always become useless for their original purposes, and then is the time for the museum, with a reputation based on its career, to step in and preserve an object of historic interest by giving it a new use, perhaps sharing it for a while with some other public body, as at Holden, Massachusetts, where a social settlement uses part of a fine old historic house, and in Green Bay, where the Tank cottage is used as a branch of the public library and for a museum.

Once in possession of such an appropriate home, the museum should arrange some part of it as it once was—not as a place to show off many things, but to reproduce an actual bit of the past, with the old things ready for their old uses. The finest museum piece in America is Mount Vernon, which is kept practically as Washington lived in it, enabling us to see the man and to realize the life of his time. A very perfect special museum is Pemberton House in Providence, Rhode Island. The original house was built about 1800, in which Mr. Pemberton long lived, devoting his time and

money to furnishing it as it would have been at that time. He never overfurnished, but if he found something better than he possessed he discarded what he had. After his death the house was reproduced in fireproof materials, and one can see today exactly how a gentleman lived a century and a quarter ago. Such examples are too much to ask of most communities; but a room, or a workshop, a printer's office, or a log cabin, presented exactly as it might have been at some given period, would give our generation the most vivid conception possible of the life of the past and would become a magnet of attraction drawing visitors to any community that has the spirit to see the thing through.